Angels seem to be appearing everywhere in our American culture. Bookstores are filled with angel books, shopping malls have angels-only boutiques, libraries carry angel newsletters and books, and there are “angel” web pages on the Internet. There are note cards with angels on them, and of course there was a television program entitled “Touched by an Angel.”

Amidst this “explosion” about angels, it is good to go back and look at what the Bible has to say about them. To begin, we should note that there is nothing mysterious about the word angel. It is a direct translation of the Greek angelos, which means “messenger,” and is used for both human and divine messengers.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word most often used is mal'ak (usually translated “angelos” by the Greek translation of the Bible— the Septuagint). Mal'ak likewise means “messenger” and can refer to humans, for example, prophets: Haggai 1:13; Isaiah 44:26; 2 Chronicles 36:15; or priests: Malachi 2:7; Ecclesiastes 5:5 as well as heavenly beings.
Angels in the Old Testament

We can distinguish three types of angelic beings in the Old Testament: the messenger of the Lord, the servants of the Lord, and the angels of the Lord.

**Messenger of the Lord.** In a variety of passages, humans are visited by a character called *the mal‘ak Yahweh*, the “messenger/angel of the Lord” who appears in a variety of contexts. In Genesis 16:7-14, the messenger announces to Hagar, Abraham’s slave girl/concubine, that she will bear Ishmael. Later the messenger will protect mother and child when they are facing death in the wilderness (Genesis 21:17-18). In Genesis 18:9-15, Abraham and Sarah are told by an angel of the coming birth of Isaac. Later the messenger will prevent Abraham from sacrificing Isaac (Genesis 22:11-18). At the river Jabbok the patriarch Jacob wrestles with a messenger of the Lord (Genesis 32:22-30).

When the Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, the messenger of the Lord appears to Moses in a burning bush, commissioning him to go and lead the people to freedom (Ex 3:2). As Joshua faces Jericho, he sees a “commander of the army of the Lord” who is an angel and who addresses him in the same words that Moses had heard at the burning bush (Joshua 5:13-15). The birth of Samson is announced by an angel of the Lord to his parents (Judges 13:2-23).

Many other examples could be cited, but these are sufficient to get the overall picture. It is a common feature of an angel that little or no attention is given to the messenger, he or she is not at the center of the event; God’s action is the key point. The focus throughout is on God’s presence and activity rather than on the messenger/angel as such. Further, the messengers/angels encounter humans in everyday places and situations — not in visions — as people are engaged in everyday activities, for example Abraham is sitting by his tent in the noonday sun (Genesis 18); Hagar is exhausted in the wilderness (Genesis 21); Joshua is preparing for battle at Jericho (Joshua 5).

Often one asks if the messenger/angel in the texts is God or a separate being. If we read these texts carefully, a curious phenomenon emerges. At times the messenger seems to be distinct from God; at times identical with God. The messenger appears first, but then suddenly it is
God who speaks and acts. This ambiguity is present when the angel speaks to Hagar, but then she says it was the Lord who spoke to her (Genesis 16:7-13); or when the angel appears to Moses in the burning bush, but then God speaks to him from there (Exodus 3:2-6).

The messenger/angel seems almost to be the human shape that God takes. The figure of the messenger is the biblical way of expressing the tension between God's distance and God's closeness. This is referred to in technical theology as God's transcendence and immanence. The messenger/angel serves as a kind of bridge spanning two aspects of God: the God who dwells high above human affairs and yet chooses to be directly active in these affairs.

**Servants of the Lord.** In the ancient Near East and in Israel the heavenly world was conceived of as a royal court. God was envisioned as a king surrounded by a retinue of heavenly beings who served in various capacities, for example, counselors, warriors, general agents. These are the servants of the Lord and are designated by various terms, including “divine beings” (Psalm 29:1; Job 38:7) and “assembly of holy ones” (Psalm 89:6 and 8).

A good description of this heavenly council can be found in 1 Kings 22:19-22. There the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah sees God enthroned with the heavenly host round about. Similarly, the prophet Isaiah, praying in the Temple, is caught up into the heavenly throne room where he hears God's attendants, the seraphs, proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:1-3).

**Angels of the Lord.** In the biblical literature from the period between the Babylonian exile (587-538 B.C.) and the time of Jesus, angels appear in more detail. Factors that contributed to this include: 1) through the suffering of the exile, God was experienced as more remote. Angels helped to bridge the gap between humans and God. 2) After the exile the role of prophets as messengers of God began to decline and disappear; angels took their place. 3) The country of Judah where the Jews lived was for several centuries a small province of the Persian Empire. The religion of the Persians (Zoroastrianism) had a highly developed theology of angels divided into forces of light and darkness. From these contexts, ancient Israel's interest in the angels of the Lord grew.
Angelic beings play a pronounced role in the book of Ezekiel (composed around 593-573 B.C.), both in his vision of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Ezekiel, chapters 8-11) and in his vision of the restored Temple (Ezekiel, chapters 40-48). The prophet Zechariah expressed his message largely in terms of a series of angelic visions (Zechariah, chapters 1-8).

In the book of Tobit (composed about 200-180 B.C.), the angel Raphael plays a key role in guiding and healing (Tb 5:12). In the book of Daniel, the angelic revealer an interpreter of mysteries and visions becomes a standard figure (Daniel 7:15-16; called Gabriel in 8:15-16 and 9:21-22).

The names given to angels:
† Michael means “Who is like God?”
† Raphael means “God heals”
† Gabriel means “God is strong”

point away from the angel and back to God. These angels are representatives of God’s presence in our world, and this forms the background for the New Testament’s understanding.

**Angels in the New Testament**

In general, the New Testament sees angels as supernatural heavenly beings that form part of the world created by God (Colossians 1:16). They surround the throne of God and offer continuous praise and glory (Luke 2:13-14; Revelation 5:8-14; 7:11-17; 19:1-8). There are many angels (Matthew 26:53; Revelation 5:11) but only two are named: Gabriel, a messenger who brings the good news of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1:19), and Michael, a warrior who leads the fight against Satan and the forces of sin (Jude 9; Revelation 12:7). Paul reduces them all to “principalities and powers” (Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Colossians 1:16).

In the stories about Jesus, angels figure prominently in three contexts. The first is Jesus’ nativity. The birth of Jesus is announced by an angel to Mary (Luke 1:26-28) and later to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:20-21). After Jesus’ birth, the message of an angel guides his escape from Herod and directs his return to the land of Israel (Matthew 2:13-14, 19-22).
The second context is that of the end of Jesus’ life. In Luke’s gospel an angel ministers to Jesus during his agony in the garden (Luke 22:43). After his death, Jesus’ resurrection is announced by angels at the tomb (Matthew 28:2-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 24:4-7; John 20:12-13). In both of these contexts — birth and resurrection — the role of angel(s) is strikingly similar to that of the “messenger of the Lord” in the Old Testament.

The third context where angels figure prominently is in the descriptions of Jesus’ second coming at the end of time (for example, Mark 13:27; Matthew 24:31; 25:31; and often in the book of Revelation). They form the attendants of Jesus in glory. In this context the Old Testament “servants of the Lord” provide the background.

The New Testament strongly stresses the superiority of Jesus over the angels (Ephesians 1:21; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 1-2; 1 Peter 3:22). Indeed, all the angels were created in and through Christ (Colossians 1:16) and they are all called to bow down and worship Christ, proclaiming his name above every name (Hebrews 1:6). Worship of angels is strictly prohibited (Colossians 2:17; Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9). One gets a clear impression that some early Christians gave too much attention to angels, an exaggeration that several New Testament writers tried to contain.

**Angels in Church Tradition**

Catholic tradition has maintained a belief in guardian angels; it is said that each person has assigned to him or her an angel who acts as guide and protector. The biblical evidence for the existence of guardian angels comes from Matthew 18:10, where Jesus admonishes his followers: “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.” In Catholic piety this belief is proclaimed in the prayer: “Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom God’s love entrusts me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide.”

Christian tradition also speaks of fallen angels, or angels who disobey God. The Second Letter of Peter warns that “…God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell” (2 Peter 2:4). And the book of Revelation describes a great battle at the end of time between Michael and Satan and Satan’s angels.
In her Eucharistic Liturgy the church joins with the angels to adore God. In Eucharistic Prayer #1, the church invokes angelic assistance: “Almighty God we pray that your angel may take this sacrifice to your altar in heaven.” In the funeral liturgy the Church prays: “May the angels lead you into paradise…”

In the history of the church, it was Dionysius the Areopagite (died around A.D. 500) who developed a list of celestial beings referring to nine choirs: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. In the middle Ages, the list was accepted by such saints as Albert the Great, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas, as well as other scholastic theologians.

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) declared that God is the creator of all things, both the “spiritual or angelic world and the corporeal and visible universe.” This was echoed in the nineteenth century at the first Vatican Council (1869-1870), and was repeated by Pope Paul VI in 1972. The belief in both guardian and fallen angels, as well as angels subordinate to Christ, is found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (see sections #328-336).

The challenge that emerges from this rich tradition of Sacred Scripture and Church teachings is to be open to being touched by God’s angels in our lives. For most of us they do not show up as supernatural beings with wings on, but rather as those fellow human beings whose faith commitment and lifestyle provide a real message from God. Being touched by them is to be touched by God.

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